

EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE: CONNECTING THE RIGHT DOTS

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Introduction

It is an honor to have been selected to present the “Mystery Speech” for the annual AAAE meeting, and I’m glad to have the opportunity to share some of my thoughts and views about our profession. Like others before me, I have reviewed some of the previous mystery speeches. I was also influenced by a presentation made at Carnegie Mellon University by Professor Randy Pausch. Dr. Pausch was a married father of three, a very popular professor at Carnegie Mellon University, and he was dying. He was suffering from pancreatic cancer, which had returned after surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation. In September 2007, Dr. Pausch gave a final lecture to his students at Carnegie Mellon that has since been downloaded more than 2 million times on the Internet. “There’s an academic tradition called the ‘Last Lecture.’ Hypothetically, if you knew you were going to die and you had one last lecture, what would you say to your students?” Dr. Pausch (2007) said, “Well, for me, there’s an elephant in the room. And the elephant in the room, for me, it wasn’t hypothetical.”

Dr. Pausch’s presentation inspired me to think about what it is I would want to say to the profession, and so I am going to simply address that about which I feel most passionate. To do this, I will present the path that has led me to the conclusions I will be presenting. I will start by identifying those defining moments in my own life that have had such a profound effect upon me personally and professionally. Then I will identify some of the lessons I have learned along that path, which will then bring me to the conclusions I will share with you as I wrap up this presentation.

Defining Moments

When I was a freshman in high school I had a science teacher who had two basic problems; he was neurotic and paranoid. On the opening day of classes he said that he had heard about us and told us that we had better not try “any of that stuff” with him. Now, we weren’t bad kids, but by the tone of his voice and the look on his face, we knew what he meant by “any of that stuff,” and, of course, felt compelled to do exactly that. I am not proud of that, but we didn’t cut him any slack; we gave him a rough way to go.

Just down the hall—same kids, same year—Mr. Karas the band instructor was late for class one day, and we were tuning our instruments and warming up when one of the kids in the band said, “I’m tired of this. Let’s play.” We liked to play, so we struck up and started cooking, playing one of our favorite songs after another. When Mr. Karas walked into the auditorium, every kid in the band knew that they had done something right because there he was, standing in the door rubbing the goose bumps out of his arms, the signal that we had hit the right notes, which didn’t happen all that often. He sat down in the back row, and when we finished playing, he stood up and gave us a one-man standing ovation; and then he came down to the front where he said, “I want you understand how important what you did today was. You took a major step towards becoming adults because you took charge of your own lives in a positive way.” From that day forth we would risk our very lives running in the halls, which was against the rules, so that we could be in the band room playing before Mr. Karas got there.

Now, these were the same kids that were trying to drive the science teacher crazy and succeeding. What was the difference? The difference was not in us but in the expectations held for each of us by those teachers. Mr. Karas the band instructor saw us as something special and unique. The science teacher simply saw us as unique. Get this; they were both right! That is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Also during my freshman year in high school, my vocational agriculture teacher, Mr. Marble, required all of us to give the FFA Creed from memory. I had given reports in classes before but never a speech. As the time approached for me to give the creed, the more nervous I became. Finally, when it was my turn I stood up too quickly; my knees were shaking; I got light-headed and dizzy; and I got sick. Mr. Marble put his arm around me and walked me out of the classroom. He had an interesting way of talking. He said, "Now, Jim it is apparent that you have difficulty when you get in front of people." I agreed that was the case. He said, "There are two ways of dealing with this problem. Number one: What we could do is to let you work in areas where you feel more confident and not put you through this kind of trauma because this is clearly traumatic for you. Number two: It probably isn't a good idea for you to go through life throwing up every time you get in front of somebody. I think you ought to do number two." He was a very good teacher; what was he really saying? He was really saying, "You will do number two." It sounded democratic, but there was no democracy here. He knew what was going to be best for me, but it was open, kind, and gentle. Then he said, "I know you can do it." I got back into the classroom and got through the speech. As soon as I was done he had his arm around me once again and said, "Jim, you have real ability here, you need to do this more often." You see, memory wasn't the problem, it was my self esteem. I haven't shut up since.

I owe Mr. Karas and Mr. Marble my life because of how they saw me and how they influenced how I saw myself. During my senior year in high school I saw some real results of their work with me. I actually won the Colorado FFA public speaking contest,

and then I was elected to serve as the president of the Colorado FFA Association. Both experiences helped to seal the deal for agricultural education as far as I was concerned.

After those experiences I matriculated to Colorado State University (CSU) with a major in agricultural business. However, after a very difficult course in agricultural economics, I happened to meet up with Dr. Irving Cross, a professor of agricultural education. We had a discussion, and he convinced me that I would be a good candidate to be a vocational agriculture teacher. So, after one quarter at CSU, I changed my major to vocational agricultural education, the major with which I graduated in the spring of 1969. My meeting with Dr. Cross was another of those defining moments we all have in our lives.

I confess that I have been extremely fortunate in that once I started working as a vocational agriculture teacher I have never experienced a bad administrator. That included Dariel Clark, my first superintendent at Holyoke High School in Holyoke, CO, in the northeastern corner of the state just west of the Colorado state line with Nebraska. He nurtured me and encouraged me in all that I did. Three years later I became the vocational agriculture teacher at Golden Senior High School in Golden, CO. Once again, I was fortunate to have a principal, Orlan Cox, who saw something in me and did all he could to ensure my success. While I was teaching vocational agriculture at Holyoke and Golden, I worked on my master's degree at CSU, and Dr. Cross continued to mentor me as well. One day he suggested that I might want to pursue a doctoral degree. To that point in time I was perfectly happy teaching vocational agriculture. I loved working with the kids, but then I started receiving calls from various people from around the country. Bill Drake from Cornell, Earl Knebel from Texas A&M, Robert Price from Oklahoma State University, Bob Stewart from Missouri, Robert Taylor from the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, and Ralph Bender from The Ohio State University all called me checking on my availability to pursue a doctoral degree at their respective

universities. I went to Dr. Cross to visit with him about which University I should select, should I decide to pursue the degree. He asked me if I wanted to work in Colorado or have the best degree. I thought about it and decided that I wanted the best degree. He told me that he believed that Ohio State offered what I needed. Thus, once again, Dr. Cross influenced my life.

During my time at Ohio State I was influenced heavily by Dr. Ralph Bender and Dr. J. Robert Warmbrod. In addition, I recognize that I have been exceptionally lucky in that great people have been in my career path. Along the way I have been fortunate to work with wonderful colleagues like L. H. Newcomb, Kirby Barrick, Dave McCracken, and Jack Elliot. Each has touched my life in a very substantive way.

I went to The Ohio State University in July of 1975 and joined the faculty in 1976. I completed the doctoral degree in 1977 and worked at OSU until 1988 when my father-in-law, who had retired to Arizona, began to decline in health. By that time I was spending almost every waking moment traveling to somewhere in the country to consult when I wasn't working for the University. Linda and I were the only family members available to assist her father, so I resigned my position at OSU and we moved to Tucson, where I spent the next 9 years traveling all over the country working with schools and even some private corporations. In 1997 I returned to my first love, agricultural education.

Lessons Learned

Along the career path I have taken I have learned some lessons, and it is those lessons that I wish to share at this time. In fact, I have learned three major lessons as follows: people are more important than programs, the genius of the agricultural education program is in the process not in the content, and, ultimately, educational climate matters the most.

The notion that people are more important than programs has simply been imprinted on my brain because of people like Junior Karas, Gary Marble, Dariel Clark, Orlan Cox, Irv Cross, Ralph Bender, Bob Warmbrod, and many others. As I

review my own experience, I am left to reflect on all of the people that have influenced me personally and professionally. While I don't want to dismiss the importance of the technical side of our lives, I am still left with the conclusion that the people in my life made the content important.

The second lesson is that the genius of the agricultural education program is in the process not in the content. By whatever process, the early thinkers like Rufus Stimson were heavily influenced by John Dewey and were persuaded that teaching the whole student was important and that content provided the context for teaching and learning. The three-circle Venn diagram, with which we are all so familiar, was the result of this early approach to teaching that ensured a process that addressed the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains of students. This has resulted in the development of the premier approach to teaching that exists in the world. Underscoring that philosophy was the development of the problem solving approach to teaching to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in the students. (Elliot, 2006)

The third lesson is that ultimately the educational climate matters the most. In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education released their report titled, "A Nation at Risk." In the early portion of that document, they noted that if a foreign government would have done to our schools what we have done ourselves, we would have considered it as an act of war; heavy rhetoric, which incidentally was incorrect.

One of the major statistics that drove the commission to make such a comment was the steady decline in the average SAT scores for about 20 years. What they neglected to note was that every subgroup taking the test had actually improved in average test scores during that same period of time. This has since been labeled "Simpson's Paradox." How is it possible for the overall average to go down when everyone is performing better? The answer lies in the relative makeup of the students taking the test. Over time, larger numbers of students were taking the SAT from underrepresented groups, who

also scored below the mean. And, while they were actually doing better, they still created a negative drain of the overall average. From that point until now, one reform movement after another has been attempted to “fix” the schools, with limited success. In fact, I was part of a team that reviewed reform efforts in more than 500 schools in Ohio during the 1990s. What we found was interesting. We found every major reform effort succeeding and every one of them also failing. The difference on whether or not the reform worked hinged on the faculty’s and staff’s attitudes about the reform being implemented. If they saw it as a positive approach and were committed to its success, then it was more likely to succeed. However, if they were doing it simply to get the state funding which came with the effort, then the reform was more likely to fail.

Several years ago I did a study of the 14 most decorated professors at the University of Arizona. They were the recipients of the coveted “5-Star” teaching award given to only one student-selected faculty member per year at the university. We video taped these wonderful teachers while they taught, and we interviewed them about their teaching. Then we did a content analysis of their teaching. The major thing that jumped out at us was the fact that they embodied the Rosenshine and Furst (1971) variables. While they were clear in their teaching and provided variability, their positive attitude about their work and their obvious enthusiasm were especially observable. The point is, the educational climate they created in the classroom was the overriding point in their success.

In terms of the climate, there are a number of strategies used that seem to matter the most. I will present five that I have consistently observed in my almost 40 years of working in education, which have also been confirmed through the research. Great teachers are more likely to be doing the following things:

1. Making students feel important and invited. Tom Peters and Bob Waterman (1984), a couple of Harvard business professors, wanted to know why certain corporations were succeeding while others were not. They found that one of

the major differences for the successful corporations was that they made their customers feel important and invited. In research done by Purkey (1978), students were identified as being invited or “disinvited” by the way they were treated by the teacher as they entered the classroom. If the teacher greeted them pleasantly, they were identified as invited. If, however, they were greeted with a frown or other negative behavior on the teachers’ part, they were identified as “disinvited.” Test scores and other variables indicated that the two groups, although different in the eyes of the teachers, were really not different in academic ability. When asked a question they could not answer, the invited students were given an average of three seconds to respond before the teacher gave clues, restated the question, redirected the question, or answered the question themselves. On the other hand, the “disinvited” students, who were just as capable, were given an average of nine-tenths of a second to respond to questions they could not answer before the teacher reentered the picture. Now, teachers do not do these things to hurt students. In fact, the most common motive is a noble one and is referred to in the literature as an “unintended, well-intentioned behavior.” Teachers want to save the students from embarrassment. However, the message such students perceive is that they are dumb, that the teacher doesn’t like them, or that they are “disinvited.”

2. Dealing with needed changes in students from a positive point of view. Productivity per work hour in America steadily declined in the post-World War II era. During that time, major management studies were conducted to try figure out what was wrong with the American worker. After decades of research, we now know what was wrong, the American managers. In fact, a specific management style associated with lower productivity has been identified. It is called “management by exception.” Unfortunately for us, it is the predominant management style in

America. When you are at work doing whatever it is you do, the supervisor or manager never shows up unless something is wrong. When you see the supervisor or manager headed your way, what thoughts go through your mind? Productivity? No, you simply want to keep the supervisor or manager away. You do enough to get by; you don't make waves. A statistician from New England saw the flaw in this thinking and went to the business community with a different approach. However, they were making money hand over fist because we were in a "boom" economy. They attributed the business success to their management skills and told the statistician to go away. His name was William Edwards Deming, and he went to Japan where he turned their industrial production around. His basic approach was to measure what was right.

Think back to your time in school. When teachers graded your work, did they check what was right or what was wrong? Did they add points, or did they take them away? If you are like most people in our country, they checked what was wrong and took away points. This is the classic case of "management by exception."

3. Getting to know students personally and learn to empathize. I had a student in class many years ago who enrolled in my vocational agriculture program after school started. You have all had this student by a different name. My student was "Arthur the Obnoxious." He was truly obnoxious, and because of that, the kids would pick on him. I found myself secretly rooting for the kids and realized I didn't like that feeling. So, I told Arthur one day that I was going to make a home visit with him after school. He said, "Oh no." I said, "Oh, yes" and took him home after school. I was teaching in northeastern Colorado at the time and took him home out into the sand hills of eastern Colorado. We drove up to an unpainted house with a screen door hanging by a single hinge. When we went into the house, a pig went in with

us. A rooster was roosting on top of the refrigerator. It was a dirty, filthy, smelly, uncomfortable place to be. As I visited with Arthur's parents, it became clear that they didn't care whether Arthur came or went, or whether he got As or Fs. Arthur was a zero, a nobody in his own home. He learned early on that he wasn't going to be a genius, but he found out he could get attention by stabbing someone with a pencil or saying something crude. I went to the teachers' lounge, where I visited with my colleagues there. I noted that we needed to do something about Arthur. One teacher said, "I know it! I yell at that kid all day long and he never changes." I learned at that moment that we could yell at the Arthurs of the world until we are blue in the face and we will never change their behavior because we are feeding them.

Over 30 years ago I started a process of giving students a few points towards their grades if they would come and visit with me one-on-one in my office. In all of these years I have never had a student refuse to earn those few points. When they come to my office, I ask them about their home and family, their goals, and their name. I already know their name, but I want to hear them say it. I have learned over the years that students tend to pronounce their own names correctly. I confess that I won't remember all of the details but I work hard on remembering their names and as much information as I can. The results over all these years have been amazing, and I attribute much of that success to this one little strategy.

4. Understanding the importance of nonverbal cues and have a sense of humor. Galloway (1974) found that approximately 70% of what some people learn comes through their eyes, not their ears. A smile, a nod, a wink, a pat on the back can have tremendous influence related to the learning environment in schools. The use of space, the physical arrangement of the classroom, the tone of voice, gestures, and even dress are

clues that send important messages about how teachers feel about the students, the school, themselves, and their work. The research in this area indicates that as the anxiety level of students is reduced through humor and the positive nonverbal cues, student performance improves. We all need to lighten up a bit, smile, and laugh more.

A number of years ago, I was in a grocery store picking up some items for my family. Now, I don't shop, I procure. I don't like shopping, so I make a list and go directly to the items and pick them up. I'm fast. One day, I was picking up some things in a grocery store when a man with his 2-year-old son in the saddle of the shopping cart passed me. The little boy was screaming and trying to grab every can and box as they went down the aisle. As he passed me, I heard him say under his breath, "Tommy, settle down. We will be out of here in a few minutes. Calm down." I was impressed with his patience with little Tommy and told him so. He replied, "I'm Tommy." I laughed for 30 minutes about that comment. He had a sense of humor.

5. Being enthusiastic. According to the research done by Rosenshine and Furst (1971), and many others for that matter, teacher enthusiasm is among the most highly correlated variables to student achievement. I was part of a North Central evaluation team one time for a small-town school. During the process, we noted that the photography program was swallowing the curriculum. We asked the principal about this issue. He told us that they had hired a young math teacher fresh out of college. While the young teacher was going to college, he had earned his way through by becoming a photographer. While learning that skill, he also learned how to develop his work. When he came to the school the first day, he was wearing a 35 millimeter camera around his neck. When students would go into drills or work on assignments, he would take pictures of

them up close, far away, standing, setting, alive, or dead. Then the next day he would post the pictures on the bulletin board. He did some unique things with the pictures such as close ups, reverse negatives, and other such things. The students were enthralled and asked him how he did that. He reminded them that this was math class but that if they would catch him between classes or at lunch he would show them. The principal said it wasn't long before he would see 30 kids chasing the teacher down the hall with cameras asking all sorts of questions. The principal said, "We had a problem and we had to do something about it. So, we released him from a period of math and let him teach a period of photography. That's the day our trouble began. Every student signed up for it, and their parents were mad if they didn't get it. So, we have a math teacher that teaches six periods of photography a day." The teacher was a good math teacher, but he was a great photography teacher. Mark Twain once said, "You can't go back to where you ain't never been." He had been there. His passion, which was linked to his skill as a photographer, was almost palpable. Enthusiasm matters.

A number of years ago I came across the following item written by the most famous author in all of literature, anonymous, and it represents a good deal about the climate issues I have been trying to make. It is titled, "The Students Are . . ."

The students are:

The most important persons on campus. Without them there would be no need for the institution.

Not cold enrollment statistics but flesh and blood human beings with feelings and emotions like our own.

Not those to be tolerated so that we can do our thing. They are our thing.

Not dependent on us; rather, we are dependent on them.

Not an interruption of our work, but the purpose of it.

We are not doing them a favor by serving them. They are doing us a

favor by giving us the opportunity to do so.

Conclusions

We've heard that the world is flat. From an educational perspective, it may also be upside down and backwards. The current mantra of "rigor, relevance, and relationships" has caught on, but it should probably be "relevance, relationships, and then rigor." The overemphasis on testing seems to have distorted the way public schools do business and has had a significant negative impact upon education generally.

Of all professions, we should understand just how important people are. Our very roots, which are steeped in teaching the whole child and engaging them in their learning through inquiry-based and the problem solving approaches reflects this orientation and, in my view, is correct.

I have had the privilege of watching fabulous teachers work over the years, and their examples have forever influenced my views. I will always be grateful to the great people who have touched me by the examples they have set and the quality of their teaching.

Finally, it seems to me that educational excellence is all about connecting the right dots, and perhaps connecting them in the right order.

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